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## Red Lake, White Earth and 'Blackgowns': The Indian Industrial Schools of St. John's Abbey and St. Benedict's Monastery, 1884-1896

Thomas Reichert

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*

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# **Red Lake, White Earth, and “Blackgowns”:**

The Indian Industrial Schools of St. John’s Abbey  
and St. Benedict’s Monastery, 1884-1896

AN HONORS THESIS

College of Saint Benedict | Saint John’s University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for All College Honors and  
Distinction in the Department of History

By T. Matthew Reichert

April 29, 2005

## A Note to the Reader

*September, 2009*

Five years have passed since I wrote this essay as part of my undergraduate study. My experiences as an historian, an educator, and a writer have been broadened in myriad ways. When read through the lenses of this experience, I would write this paper differently now.

When I wrote this paper I had access to the archives Saint John's Abbey and Saint Benedict's Monastery. I was able to glean much information from writings, memoirs, and correspondence of the Abbots of Saint John's Abbey, the missionary priest Fr. Aloysius Hermanutz, OSB, various federal agents and officials, and representatives of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions. These primary sources helped me to piece together the story of these two schools, but from an administrative, Euro-American perspective. I did not set out to write about the experience of Native American students or the effect of the schools on Native American communities (nor did I have the documents to do so), so that part of the story remains untold. My focus in this essay is on a very specific topic: what motivated a Catholic religious order to enter into the work of off-reservation industrial schools for Native American children in the late nineteenth century?

In this essay I got bogged down in deciding the right context for telling this story and determining how much of American Indian policy I had to discuss (even how much of American history, for that matter). Also, the scope and focus of my paper became finalized just about the time that I finished it, so if I were writing it now, I would approach the historiography of the industrial school movement differently and would engage more fully with the scholarship that discusses the motivations of Christian denominations in the education of Native American children in boarding schools as well as the pressures and issues that were shaping religious communities – especially Catholic ones – in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. I would obviously include the broader historical conversation about the industrial school system, but would focus more on historians such as James Carroll and his work examining the experience of new immigrants in the process of Americanization.

Next, I would handle the discussion of federal Indian policy differently, seeking to create a more direct and clear overview of the relationship between the religious missionaries and the federal government. As it stands, specific conversations are lost in a more generic discussion of previous scholarship and governmental policy. This generic recapitulation dulls the focus of my thesis and limits my contribution to the historical conversation.

Finally, I would be more attentive to the construction of my prose. In particular, this paper would benefit from more active verbs.

In an editorial that appeared in the *Democratic Review* in 1839, journalist John O'Sullivan gave voice to the previously-unnamed ambition of a burgeoning nation:

The American people having derived their origin from many other nations, and the Declaration of National Independence being entirely based on the great principle of human equality, these facts demonstrate at once our disconnected position as regards any other nation; that we have, in reality, but little connection with the past history of any of them, and still less with all antiquity, its glories, or its crimes. On the contrary, our national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity.<sup>1</sup>

This audacious self-proclamation sought to establish the United States – politically, economically, culturally, racially – as the “noblest temple” of all that was thought to be holy and true. While O'Sullivan maintains that this endeavor marks the beginning of a “new history,” he still maintains – if only briefly – that the foundation of this “great

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<sup>1</sup> John O'Sullivan, *The Great Nation of Futurity*, *The United States Democratic Review* (Vol. 6, Issue 23), pg. 426

nation of futurity” is firmly rooted in the experiences of a people “having derived their origin from many other nations.”<sup>2</sup>

By the early 1850s, the “great nation of futurity” had claimed the central part of the Minnesota Territory as a result of the increasing presence of immigrants who began to settle throughout the Sauk River valley. This land, eventually to be named Stearns County, had been inhabited for centuries by Native Americans before playing host to an influx of European farmers. By the middle part of the nineteenth century, German Catholics arrived in full force, taking part in the western march that O’Sullivan declared to be so manifestly destined. Along with these settlers, however, came their own particular culture, their language, their stories, their worldviews, and, of course, their religion.<sup>3</sup>

In 1856, the same year that the city of St. Cloud, Minnesota, was incorporated, Benedictine monks from Germany arrived on the banks of the Mississippi River and founded a small priory near what are now called the Beaver Islands. Their charge was simple: care for the pastoral needs of the Germans of Stearns County, administer the sacraments, and train local students for service in the priesthood. These men brought with them a living, vibrant monastic tradition that was tempered and preserved through centuries of fidelity and observance of the Rule of St. Benedict, written in the sixth century. But just as these monks brought their own storied experiences to this

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pg. 427

<sup>3</sup> Colman Barry, *Worship and Work* (Liturgical Press: Collegeville, 1993) pg. 21

community on the frontier, they would be changed by life in a nation that, as John O'Sullivan reminded us, "separates us from the past and connects us to the future only."<sup>4</sup>

The Benedictine Order was engaged as missionaries since its very founding in the sixth century. Though comparisons could be drawn to the missionary work of St. Boniface with the Germans, or St. Augustine with the English, the task set before the small band of monks who found themselves in Stearns County was unique. As a historian of the Benedictines in the United States writes, "In their work as educators, missionaries, liturgists, farmers, and builders, American Benedictines drew from a European experience analogous to what they encountered in the United States. But there was one work they undertook for which there was no precedent: the mission to the American Indians..." The Sons of Benedict, sent to minister to the new residents of the Minnesota Territory, would find an entirely new apostolate among the original inhabitants of their new homeland: the Ojibwe.<sup>5</sup>

A connection between the Ojibwe tribes of northern Minnesota and the Benedictines of Saint John's Abbey and Saint Benedict's Monastery of Stearns County, Minnesota, was developed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In 1857, Abbot Boniface Wimmer, OSB, the founder of the first Benedictine monastery in the United

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pg. 32-33

John O'Sullivan, *The Great Nation of Futurity*. pg. 426

<sup>5</sup> Joel Rippinger, OSB, *The Benedictine Order in the United States: An Interpretive History*, (Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN) pg. 130)

States, received an invitation from Bishop Joseph Cretin of St. Paul to establish a monastery in Crow Wing, Minnesota, for the purpose of evangelization and ministry to the Ojibwe. For decades a handful of itinerant missionary priests roamed the northern forests, baptizing as they wandered. By the late 1870s many of these priests, such as Fr. Francis Xavier Pierz, were aged and incapable of offering a stable presence. Bishop Rupert Seidenbusch, OSB, head of the Vicariate of Northern Minnesota and formerly the first abbot of Saint John's, resurrected the invitation to the Benedictines. In 1878, Abbot Alexius Edelbrock, OSB, accepted Bishop Seidenbusch's invitation to send members of the monastic community to staff the mission stations at White Earth Reservation. Fr. Aloysius Hermanutz, OSB, Sr. Philomena Ketten, OSB, and Sr. Lioba Braun, OSB, departed in November of that year to begin their new assignment.<sup>6</sup>

The three Benedictines at White Earth operated the Catholic mission church, offered the sacraments and religious instruction, and opened day schools for the children to educate and catechize them. Both of the sponsoring communities would continue these on-reservation apostolates well into the twentieth century, sending dozens of monks and nuns to live and work at White Earth and, later, at Red Lake Reservation. But the activities of the monks and nuns on the reservations are just a part of the story of this Ojibwe/Benedictine relationship. Another part, one that has often been skimmed over, is the existence of boarding schools on the campuses of the Abbey

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<sup>6</sup> Colman Barry, *Worship and Work*, pg. 45

and Monastery designed for the education of Native American children in industrial and domestic trades.<sup>7</sup>

The volumes written on the history of Saint John's and Saint Benedict's in large part neglect these Industrial Schools. Sr. Grace McDonald, OSB, in *With Lamps Burning* gives just enough lines to the school at St. Benedict's so that the reader, if paying attention, might notice that it existed at one point in time. Fr. Colman Barry, OSB, gives slightly more attention to the topic in his book, *Worship and Work*. In both of these volumes, no real analysis is given to the founding or operation of the schools. Instead, all that exists are just 'honorable mentions.'<sup>8</sup>

Despite this lack of attention, it is clear that the opening of these industrial schools was the result of three factors. First, the Benedictines subscribed to contemporary stereotypes about Native Americans and believed in governmental policies related to their treatment. Second, the material situation of the mission and the relationship between the Benedictines and other parties on the reservation created a situation where an off-reservation venture would have seemed desirable. Third, the financial situation at Saint John's and Saint Benedict's enticed the missionaries into opening the schools because of the possibility of financial gain.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In a recent exhibit of the history of Saint Benedict's Monastery, the Benedictine Sisters included an apology to former students of the White Earth and Red Lake schools, and to both communities at large, for the impact these schools had on the native culture of the Ojibwe.

<sup>8</sup> Colman Barry, *Worship and Work*, pg. 146

Grace McDonald, *With Lamps Burning* (North Central: St. Paul, 1957) pg. 122

<sup>9</sup> This thesis is heavily based on the primary sources found in the St. John's Abbey Archives. There is no information listed as property of the St. Benedict's Monastery Archives. Most of the material relating to the school at St. Benedict's is



## Changes in Federal Policy

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The movement for changes in governmental policies regarding Native Americans began just after the Civil War. Reports of violence on the Great Plains and in the Indian Territory flowed back to cities in the east. Events such as the 1866 ambush of Lieutenant William Fetterman and his company of eighty men near Fort Kearney served to heighten public awareness, concern, and fear. Description of the destitution and poverty that existed on Native American lands was also unsettling. Questions were being raised regarding the “Indian problem” that faced the expanding United States.<sup>10</sup>

Fact-finding commissions were sent by Congress to analyze the status of the Native Americans, to identify the causes of their hardship, and to make recommendations for new policies to govern their care. One such commission was sent forth from Washington, DC on March 3, 1865, one month before Appomattox Courthouse and the end of the Civil War. Almost two years later, on January 26, 1867, the committee, headed by Senator James Doolittle of Wisconsin, submitted its report for consideration. The “Doolittle Committee,” as it became known, found several reasons for the decrease in Native American population and standard of living. The report contended that the Native Americans were suffering “by disease, by intemperance, by

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located at the Abbey Archives because the Abbot of St. John’s held considerable legal authority over the monastery at St. Joseph. For this reason, correspondence directed to the school at St. Benedict’s would have been addressed to the abbot of St. John’s instead of directly to the superior of the Monastery. Little material of much significance exists after a higher level of autonomy was achieved. For space reasons, the abbreviation ‘SJAA’ indicates sources from the St. John’s Abbey Archives.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians* (University of Nebraska: Lincoln, 1986) pg. 154

wars among themselves and with the whites, by the steady and resistless emigration of white men into the territories of the west.” The violence that caused the formation of the investigation was traced back to the “lawless white men” who stood on the border between the tribes and “civilized” life. The Committee also found the encroachment upon traditional hunting grounds by the railroads to blame, since this expansion threatened buffalo herds upon which so many Native American tribes depended.<sup>11</sup>

Congress chose to respond to these adverse conditions not by reprimanding errant white settlers or aggressive railroad companies, but by positioning themselves to expunge Native American behaviors viewed as “savage” and “primitive” in order to bring them into the light of “civilization.” Native Americans, it was reasoned, could not become engaged in conflict with the expanding American nation if they became more “Americanized” themselves. President Ulysses S. Grant outlined the procedure that accompanied this new approach in federal policies affecting Native Americans in his annual message to Congress in 1870. Grant declared that the government was responsible to address the plight of Native Americans by enlisting the help of Christian missionary societies. This partnership between government and church was charged with the objective to “Christianize and civilize the Indian, and train him in the art of peace.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Report of the Doolittle Committee: January 26, 1867*, an excerpt taken from Francis Paul Prucha’s book, *Documents of the United States Indian Policy* (University of Nebraska: Lincoln, 1990) pg. 102-103

<sup>12</sup> *Grant’s Second Annual Message to Congress, December 5, 1870* as included in Prucha’s *Documents of United States Indian Policy*

The Board of Indian Commissioners, a group formed to advise the federal government on affairs related to the Native Americans, agreed with the President. The Board wrote that it was the duty of the government, through the aid of the churches, “to protect them, to educate [the Native Americans] in industry, the arts of civilization, and the principles of Christianity.” The Board elaborated, putting the situation in a much more stark way. In their view the true obstacle was not the difficulties and quagmires of policy reform. Instead, it was the culture of the various tribes that stood in the way of progress; a concept which was viewed as a lifestyle choice made by Native Americans, not as expressions of identity.

[It] is evident that no 12,000,000 acres...can long be kept simply as a park, in which wild beasts are hunted by wilder men. This Anglo-Saxon race will not allow the car of civilization to stop long at any line of latitude or longitude on our broad domain. If the Indian in his wildness plants himself on the track, he must inevitably be crushed by it.<sup>13</sup>

Native Americans were caught in the shrinking pool of the American frontier and Manifest Destiny, it would seem, would stop for no one. In order to escape annihilation, federal policy declared that they must be incorporated into eastern “civilization”, be “Americanized,” and abandon their tribal ways.

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<sup>13</sup> The Board of Indian Commissioners, cited by Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father*, pg. 160

The Board of Indian Commissioners, cited by Henry Warner Bowden, *American Indians and Christian Missions: Studies in Cultural Conflict* (University of Chicago: Chicago, 1981) pg. 193

“Civilizing” the Native Americans became a task accomplished through the force of education but also through evangelization and religious conversion. The government sought to achieve the transformation they desired by utilizing the Christian missionaries and their catechism. As Sr. Francis Mary Riggs, a cultural historian, notes: “A change in religion involves changes in the entire culture because...culture is an integrated whole and religion is of necessity interlocked with social and economic aspects of life.”<sup>14</sup> It was not the goal, therefore, for the Native Americans to simply become believers in Jesus Christ. Along with the Gospel, the tribes were also saddled with learning how to live and sustain an American way of life.

This battle of civilization-through-education was championed by General Richard Pratt, a Civil War Army officer. Pratt experimented with various educational theories and methods at the Carlisle Industrial School in Pennsylvania. The goal was simple: to remove the Indian children from their reservations and place them in off-reservation boarding schools, away from their parents and tribal culture. Pratt thought that this removal would facilitate quicker instruction, a deeper retention, and a more complete and prompt breakdown of whatever tenets of “Indianness” remained. Pratt brought to this equation his years of military experience as well as religious conviction. In his memoirs, Pratt recalled speaking at a Baptist convention in 1883 where he declared, “In Indian civilization I am a Baptist because I believe in immersing the

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<sup>14</sup> Sr. Francis Mary Riggs, *Attitude of Missionary Sisters Toward American Indian Acculturation* (Catholic University of America: Washington, 1967) pg. 5-6

Indians in our civilization, and when we get them under, holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked.” The education-for-assimilation movement was in full force, and Native Americans were to sink or swim.<sup>15</sup>

The Board of Indian Commissioners and General Pratt found an ally in one other. Through their shared work and common commitment to education, it was believed that the Native Americans could be elevated into full citizenship. This alliance between educators and bureaucrats began by targeting children in the various tribes. It was felt that the youngest would be the easiest to instruct, and the most receptive to a curriculum of assimilation. In order to expedite the process even further, it was believed necessary that the children be taught off the reservation. Indian Agents at government agencies on reservations across the west advocated the establishment of industrial schools and the removal of children from their families. Major William H. Forbes, agent at Devil’s Lake Agency in South Dakota, supported the Board of Indian Commissioners and General Pratt in “the establishment of a manual-labor school, which is certainly, in my opinion, the only true method of education for the Indians; take them from their parents, board and clothe them, teaching them to labor, as well as to read and write.”<sup>16</sup>

It is the industrial school model found at Carlisle that was replicated in Stearns County. At both Saint John’s and Saint Benedict’s, academic study took the form of a

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Henry Pratt, *Battlefield and Classroom: Four Decades with the American Indian, 1867-1904* (Yale University: New Haven, 1964) pg. 335

<sup>16</sup> Major William H. Forbes, cited by James T. Carroll, *Seeds of Faith: Catholic Indian Boarding Schools* (Garland: New York, 2000) pg. 6

program divided into three years. Saint John's designed a first year regimen aimed at familiarizing the children with the routine of academic and school life. The curriculum included instruction in reading, writing on slates, oral catechism, arithmetic up to multiplication, and spelling. The second year of study added classes in English grammar, primary geography, Bible history, penmanship, letter writing, and dictation. The third and final year of the program finished with declamation, mental arithmetic, higher geography, United States history, composition, dictation, and Christian doctrine. All three years included experience through apprenticeship and the learning of industrial and agricultural trades. For most students this meant learning work in either the tailor shop, the shoemaker shop, the carpenter shop, the butcher shop, the blacksmith shop, the tinsmith shop, the engineering department, the broom and brush-making shop, the kitchen, or the garden and agricultural department.<sup>17</sup>

At Saint Benedict's the curriculum focused on religion, English, and the domestic arts. Education in the domestic department at Saint Benedict's was divided into dressmaking, plain sewing, crocheting, mending, darning, knitting, laundry, gardening, and cooking. Premium awards were given for economy, painting, music, and baking a cake. In both schools, awards were given out for highest performance in the respective

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<sup>17</sup> *Schools for the Chippewa Indians Conducted by the Fathers and Sisters of the Order of St. Benedict, 1887*, pg. 4, SJAA fl46:53  
This document was published by the two schools and served as an academic catalogue as well as an informational program on the history of the schools and work among the Ojibwe Indians. It also includes information on the non-reservation school at White Earth.

industrial departments or in personal conduct. Such awards included medals or crowns for order and neatness, punctuality, and general proficiency.<sup>18</sup>

Academics and industrial trades were not the only part of school life for the Native American children at Carlisle or at St. John's and St. Benedict's. If living an "American" way of life was the objective, students would need to learn appropriate social and leisure activities, as well. Several clubs and organizations allowed students to participate in such extracurricular activities. At Saint John's, the "Otchipwe Dramatic Association" was organized to stage theatrical works throughout the year using actors culled from the student body. Long before the debate over political correctness in regards to professional and college team mascots, the boys were organized in to baseball clubs, one of which was called "The Braves." The younger students played on a team aptly named "The Little Fellows." Also among the organizations was the St. Meinrad's Altar Boys' Association with the objective to train some of the boys to serve "with propriety in the sanctuary." Those who excelled with high levels of "propriety" were fashioned with the title "Efficient Acolyte." Fourteen boys bore the title.<sup>19</sup>

At Saint Benedict's, the extracurricular activities focused on domesticity. At the close of each academic year students performed a special program to exhibit their newly-learned skills. The production marking the close of the 1887 academic year included solo vocal selections, duets, trios, and a poetry recitation. Dialogues titled

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<sup>18</sup> *Schools for the Chippewa Indians*, pg. 14-15, 23, 25

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 6

*Catalogue of St. John's Industrial School for Chippewa Indian Boys, 1889*, pg. 6, SJAA fl46:53

“The Thirteen States” and “Little Mischief” were separated by a two-part women’s chorus performance of the religious hymn “Ave Sanctissima.” The event was rounded off with the distribution of premium awards and a German selection, “Der Wanderer,” but not before the little girls performed a gymnastics routine.<sup>20</sup>

It should not be surprising that this development and operation of the industrial school as manifestation of federal “Indian policy” and the partnership between the government and religious denominations has been the target of scholarly study for the past several decades. Some historians have written about the practice of industrial education in a positive, complimentary light. In the introduction to the memoirs of General Pratt edited by Robert Utley, the historian writes of the General that his “true significance lies...in his role as a determined, courageous, selfless worker in behalf of justice to a people suffering from four centuries of oppression by the dominant culture.”<sup>21</sup> This praise of the General is, by extension, praise of the industrial school policy as a vehicle of “justice” to root out “oppression.” A similar approach, commenting on the policy itself through an interpretation of the man behind it, can be found in the book, *Pratt: The Red Man’s Moses* by Elaine Goodale Eastman. If Pratt is Moses, as the metaphor suggests, then the Native Americans must be the Israelites, and

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<sup>20</sup> *Schools for the Chippewa Indians, 1887*, pg. 26, SJAA fl46:53

<sup>21</sup> Richard Henry Pratt, *Battlefield and Classroom*, pg. xvii



the policy of industrial education must be just like the Ten Commandments, handed down by God through the mouth of the superintendent of Carlisle.<sup>22</sup>

The common theme that binds together most of the works written recently is the failure of the industrial school approach, though historians have attributed failure to differing factors. In the book, *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862*, Robert Berkhofer argues that the Indian missions and schools were doomed from the beginning because of the missionaries' assumptions, racial attitudes, and the general persistence of the tribal culture. Henry Warner Bowden argues that renewed sense of tribal spirituality and an attitude of defiant preservation defended Indian culture against the onslaught of assimilationist policy in his book *American Indians and Christian Missions: Studies in Cultural Conflict*.<sup>23</sup> K. Tsianina Lomawaima echoes this view as she writes about her family's experience with the Chilocco Indian School in Omaha in her book *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School*. The Native Americans, she argues, actively created an ongoing social and educational process. They did not, according to her research, succumb to the assimilation policy and ethnic dissolution. In this way, she argues that the schools did not fail so much as the Native Americans succeeded.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Elaine Goodale Eastman, *Pratt: The Red Man's Moses* (University of Oklahoma: Norman, 1935), pg. 10

<sup>23</sup> Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787-1862* (Athenaeum: New York, 1972) pg. 160

Henry Warner Bowden, *American Indians and Christian Missions: Studies in Cultural Conflict* (University of Chicago: Chicago, 1981) pg. 167

<sup>24</sup> K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (University of Nebraska: Lincoln, 1994), pg. 166

In *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940*, Brenda Child utilizes a vast array of letters written by students in the boarding schools to paint a picture of the processes and structures within the experience of Native American education, as opposed to the reliance on oral history or government documentation found in other volumes on the subject. By utilizing the personal correspondence of actual students and families, Child points out that many families remained united despite the separation offered by boarding off-reservation, and that a unique “intertribalism” resulted from the confluence of various tribes in the same location. Child also offers the observation that some students went to the schools voluntarily, for reasons ranging from economic hardship to fear of racism, and not because of force.<sup>25</sup>

David Wallace Adams argues in *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* that the schools were a failure because of the assumption held by proponents that the acculturation process was simple, and the naïve belief that the Native Americans couldn’t help but embrace the culture of white-America. Adams also argues that the failure was a result of Congress’ refusal to allot the adequate funds necessary for the work social reformers envisioned. Yet, despite the claims of poor funding and the underestimation of the process, Adams makes the case that the boarding schools, though not fulfilling expectations, did manage to have a profound impact on the cultural and psychological being of the Indian children. Not

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<sup>25</sup> Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1998)

surprisingly, elongated exposure to a different way of living, different attitudes, morals, skills, prejudices, and different cultures and tribes all served to have an affect on the returning children.<sup>26</sup>

Henry Fritz (*The Movement for Indian Assimilation, 1860-1890*) and Francis Paul Prucha (*The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*) agree with David Wallace Adams that the United States Congress is to bear a large portion of the blame for the failure of the Native American education system because of the lack of adequate funds, indicating an underestimation of the true effort required for success. Fritz also argues that assimilation was designed specifically to remove the Native Americans from their lands in order to accommodate White development of tribal territory.<sup>27</sup>

Other authors have taken a much more negative view of the schools by examining the legacy they have left behind. David DeJong condemns the education practices employed by industrial boarding schools. In his book, *Promises of the Past: A History of Indian Education in the United States*, he argues that personal, familial, and social consequences have plagued Native Americans as a result of this system of education, the most serious of which is the attack on self-identity inherent in the practice of acculturation. DeJong makes the strong statement that “Educational efforts that seek not to instruct but to assimilate constitute educational malpractice.” In his

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<sup>26</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (University of Kansas: Topeka, 1995) pg. 336

<sup>27</sup> Henry E. Fritz, *The Movement for Indian Assimilation, 1868-1890* (University of Pennsylvania: Philadelphia, 1963) pg. 167

book *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide*, George Tinker furthers the argument against the boarding schools by declaring that all Christian missionaries were partners in genocide. According to his argument, though they were unwittingly committing such acts of cultural destruction, and though they had the best intentions, they are guilty in the destruction of tribal culture, social structures, and the spreading of poverty and death. Ward Churchill joins Tinker's interpretation of cultural genocide in *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools*. Churchill strives to put to rest any belief in positive effects of industrial education, arguing that the schools instead served as a tool of imperialism, designed to subdue and not to include. He states that, "of all the malignancies embodied in twentieth-century U.S./Canadian Indian policy, the schools were arguably the worst."<sup>28</sup>

This mention of the historiographical debate regarding Indian education in the late nineteenth century is just that: a mention. The goal of this paper is not to examine the successes or failures of the Indian schools of Stearns County, nor is it to try and make an argument of guilt or innocence on the charge of "cultural genocide." Instead, this paper attempts to discover why the Benedictines began such a venture in the first

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<sup>28</sup> David DeJong, *Promises of the Past: A History of Indian Education in the United States* (North American Press: Golden, 1993) pg. x

George Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 1993), pg. 4  
Ward Churchill, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools* (City Lights Books: San Francisco, 2004) pg. xlv

place. With that said, let us begin to examine the three factors that led to the formation of industrial schools in central Minnesota.<sup>29</sup>

## **Factor One**

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The first factor that led to the formation of the two industrial schools was that the Benedictines believed the work they were doing was “good.” The missionaries from the Order were in sync with the viewpoints of the Board of Indian Commissioners and of individuals such as General Pratt and President Grant. When one considers the extreme effort that would have been required in order to found off-reservation institutions such as the industrial schools, it is difficult to imagine that the monastic communities would have accepted such a profound challenge if they did not feel their actions were appropriate and necessary.

Even before the idea of off-reservation schools was proposed, the Benedictine missionaries would have had to subscribe to the belief in the importance of “civilizing” the Native Americans to accept the invitation of Abbot Wimmer and Bishop Seidenbusch to mission posts on the reservations in the first place. To put it simply, the task was not easy, either physically or emotionally. The total amount of territory that the missionaries were responsible for was almost five million square acres (4,705,963 to be exact). This total mass was divided between the White Earth and Red Lake

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<sup>29</sup> Though not the focus of this paper, I did want to make mention of the vibrant and important discussion contained in other volumes about Indian education. The very brief discussion that occurs here is anything but complete, and many more worthwhile and important volumes exist.

Reservations, separated by eighty miles of forests, hills, and lakes. Fr. Aloysius had to traverse this expanse in order to make sick calls and perform the rites and rituals of the Church, all on foot. The Sisters also had their work cut out for them. On November 12, 1878, three days after their arrival on the reservation, Sr. Lioba and Sr. Philomena held the first school session for seventeen children. Three days later, the number of pupils was twenty. Attendance continued to grow until, at one time, the two nuns made sure over sixty pupils received daily instruction. As if this were not enough, the sisters opened another school near Buffalo River where another forty students completed their lessons. Truly, it must have been her conviction that the work of education among Native Americans was necessary that enabled Sr. Philomena to make the sixteen-mile roundtrip journey on horseback every morning, rain or shine.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the size of the reservation, the material status of the mission caused significant difficulty. When the Benedictines arrived, the mission consisted of a poor log church, an equally poor log house, and a stable. The sisters slept in the dingy attic of the residence while Fr. Aloysius slept in a small room on the first floor. The house and the church lacked proper heat for the harsh, northern Minnesota winters, and the three missionaries would regularly freeze in the “icy hole.” Meat, potatoes, bread and even cooking oil had to be thawed every morning. A lack of proper bedding kept all three missionaries shivering at night despite the heat shed by the wood-burning

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<sup>30</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, November 12, 1878, SJAA fl46:7  
Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, November 15, 1878, SJAA fl46:7  
Aloysius Hermanutz, *History of the Indian Mission at White Earth, Minn.* (1922), SJAA fl46:6

oven in the house. Coals needed to be brought upon the altar during mass to keep Fr. Aloysius' hands, as well as the communion wine, from freezing. There was little that could be done to combat such cold conditions with the buildings and supplies available to the missionaries without spending a large amount of money, which the three did not possess. Though the requests for additional funding sent to the Abbot and to the Bishop were not immediately granted, a quick remedy seems to be some "moonshine" sent for the sisters by the Abbot. As Fr. Aloysius wrote to Abbot Alexius, in deep gratitude, "It put an end to the cough."<sup>31</sup>

Despite these adverse conditions the monastic chapter voted to keep the trio in place, frozen or not, because the community possessed the same ideas that were commonplace when it came to post-Civil War Native American policy. In a letter to Senator Dwight M. Sabin in 1888, Abbot Alexius' words carried a similar tone to those of General Pratt and the Board of Indian Commissioners:

The Indians are wards of our Government; the Government has taken their lands and has obligations toward them. The civilization and education of the Indian is dear to every American citizen; the bayonet can exterminate, but cannot civilize and educate, as we all know. The old Indians are what they are and but very little can be done with them; we must elevate the growing generation, and to do

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<sup>31</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, January 2, 1879, SJAA f46:7  
Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, March 17, 1880, SJAA f46:7

this work, schools are everywhere a condition sine qua non. The Government can better afford to pay liberally for these schools than for an army.<sup>32</sup>

Since the placement of the three missionaries was renewed by vote of the monastic chapter, it could easily be assumed that they remained out of monastic obedience. Indeed, a healthy dose of submission and deference was probably required to get Sr. Philomena back on her horse every morning. It is clear, however, that Fr. Aloysius shared the same views as Abbot Alexius, that education was integral to missionary work.

In a letter to the abbot, Fr. Aloysius commented particularly on the importance of their work among the children of the reservation. Without a school to use as an instrument of evangelization, Hermanutz wrote, "I will convert only the old folks while the young ones got to the devil." Abbot Alexius agreed that support for schools engaged in such work was necessary. In a letter to Fr. Stephan of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, the abbot expresses his belief that the government would bear "fruit a hundred fold" if it would only spend money for the education of Indian children. Fr. Aloysius again declared his agreement: "A wild Indian is less dangerous than a half-civilized one, without religion and good morals; he is and remains all his life, a plague to his neighbors." Once industrial schools were opened at Saint John's and Saint Benedict's, one of the regulations outlined in the official school catalogue reflects the

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<sup>32</sup> Alexius Edelbrock to D. M. Sabin, February 14, 1888, SJAA f146:53



purpose of indoctrinating the Indian children with the white man's ways: "Pupils are required to engage in actual labor upon the lands or work shops of the Institution so that they may become useful members of society." The language and biases of these letters and statements clearly indicate that the Benedictines had waged a spiritual and educational war against "Indianness." The sons and daughters of St. Benedict were now equal partners with General Pratt and the Board of Indian Commissioners.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, it is readily apparent that the Benedictines of Stearns County embarked upon the mission of evangelization and education to the Native Americans of northern Minnesota because they believed in the necessity of the work. They were committed, out of obedience to their community and as a result of their own subscription to popular opinion, to assimilating the Ojibwe into mainstream Christian, "civilized" society.

It is important to mention that, while the Benedictines found much in common with the policies and attitudes of those working at Native American reform, they were not completely cut from the same cloth. In his book *Seeds of Faith: Catholic Indian Boarding Schools*, James Carroll writes about four Native American schools in the Dakota Territory operated by Catholic nuns of various religious orders. The nuns were all immigrants or second-generation Americans, just like the Benedictines of Stearns

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<sup>33</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, January 29, 1885, SJAA f46:7  
Alexius Edelbrock to Fr. J.A. Stephan, February 1, 1886, SJAA, Letter Box z274  
Aloysius Hermanutz, *Protest*, January 20, 1880, SJAA, Letter Box z274  
*Schools for the Chippewa Indians*, pg. 4, SJAA f46:53

County. Carroll writes that the fact of their foreign birth, or close ties to foreign culture, made the processes utilized by the schools to assimilate the Native Americans “less radical and more culturally sensitive” than efforts by other institutions. The central, American identity was lacking because of their immigrant status. Carroll, citing historian John Scott, points out that “off the boat and onto the reservation was a common situation for those [nuns] who staffed government contract schools and carried on related Indian work. Thus, many monks and nuns who labored to ‘Americanize’ Native Americans were themselves strangers in a strange land.”<sup>34</sup>

The Benedictines in Minnesota, as mentioned, were in an extremely similar situation to the Sisters in the Dakota Territories. The Stearns County monastic communities were founded in 1856-1857 by German monks and nuns who came to central Minnesota via Pennsylvania for the specific purpose of ministering to the Catholic, German immigrant population. Their original objective in coming to the United States was not to “civilize” and certainly not to “Americanize.” They belonged to a group of people who deliberately attempted not to assimilate culturally. They retained their German language, celebrated German holidays, and viewed the world through distinctively German eyes. In fact, Fr. Aloysius referred to the White Earth Mission as “New Swabia,” a reference to his German homeland.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> James Carroll, *Seeds of Faith: Catholic Indian Boarding Schools* (Garland: New York, 2000), pg. xxii, pg. 173

<sup>35</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, November 12, 1878, SJAA fl46:7

It would seem, then, that the Benedictine belief in “civilizing” the Native Americans equated to conversion to Christianity and to living a European-like lifestyle. “Americanization” might not have been their main objective or an intentional target at all. But, the missionaries certainly believed they were doing “good” works. Conviction of this type can be a powerful motivator. It was not, however, the only factor that led to the creation of off-reservation boarding schools.

## **Factor Two**

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As mentioned before, the material status of the mission left much to be desired. The shabby buildings, the harsh weather, the enormity of the geographic area, and the inexperience of the missionaries all combined to create a less than ideal environment. These were not, however, the only battles waged by the Benedictines on the reservation. White Earth and Red Lake Reservations played host to other groups hoping to impact the Native Americans. Conflict between these groups – Catholic missionaries, Episcopalian missionaries, and government officials – was commonplace, resulting in challenges and frustrations beyond the inconveniences of winter weather and saddle sores.

The “official” Christian denomination at the White Earth Agency was Episcopalian. President Grant, in his reforms of federal policy the 1860s and 1870s, began the practice of assigning Indian Agencies to various denominations and missionary societies. Part of the logic behind such an arrangement was that, through

Christianization, the Indians would be “civilized” and reach an elevated place in society ultimately resulting in citizenship. The other reason was more immediate.

Many officials on the payroll of the Indian Service were thoroughly corrupt. In a time when the government was run by the spoils system, Indian Agencies provided a ripe selection of offices to bestow upon political supporters and donors. The extent of the corruption began to become apparent to the general public when commissions, like the Doolittle Committee, found instances of dishonesty committed by officials. General William Sherman was the member of one such investigatory commission. On an inspection of one agency, the general discovered that the agent on the reservation had managed to save approximately \$50,000 from his salary over the three years he held his position. Sherman found this a curious fact considering that the yearly salary of an Indian Agent was only \$1,500 per year. Other stories of administrative trickery surfaced, causing social reformers originally concerned with the state of Native Americans to become concerned with the state of the Indian Service. In remarks during debate on the floor of the House of Representatives, then-Congressman James Garfield declared, “no branch of the national government is so spotted with fraud, so tainted with corruption, so unworthy of a free and enlightened government, as this Indian

department.”<sup>36</sup> It was clear that something had to be done to clean up the department, but to maintain changes that had already been instituted.

The second reason that control of agencies was given to Christian denominations was, therefore, to nominate honest and righteous men to serve as agents and properly administer the government funds and supplies for the benefit of the Native Americans. Under this policy, called the “Peace Policy,” the Episcopal Church received control of eight agencies, one of which was White Earth Agency. The Episcopal mission societies, with Bishop Henry Whipple of the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota, were given government appropriations for the operation of schools and churches, oversaw the distribution of goods purchased by the government for the tribes, and had the ability to nominate men for government appointment to the position of Indian Agent.<sup>37</sup>

Because of their position as the official denomination on the White Earth Reservation, the Episcopalian missionaries were better funded and better supplied than the Catholics. Compared with the drafty log structure the Benedictines had inherited, the Episcopalians enjoyed the use of five churches, four residences, several school buildings and a free hospital. The federal government appropriated money for the construction of buildings and the purchase of land used by the Protestant missionaries. The Catholics could little compare to the well-funded Episcopalians. The Abbey and the Convent sent what money they could, but they had their own expenses. In the first few

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<sup>36</sup> James Garfield, cited by R. Pierce Beaver, *Church, State, and the American Indians: Two and a Half Centuries of Partnership in Missions between Protestant Churches and Government* (Concordia Publishing: St. Louis, 1966), pg. 124

<sup>37</sup> Prucha, *The Great Father*, pg. 161

months of their work, Fr. Aloysius had managed to collect only two dollars for the support of the mission. Financially speaking, this was hardly the start the missionaries had hoped for. Jealousy began to make an appearance as Fr. Aloysius lamented the disparity between his fledgling mission and the comparatively sumptuous “Protestant Philistine camp”.<sup>38</sup>

Besides the Episcopal schools, the government also provided for the operation of a secular, “government” school. The school was operated by Mr. Clem Beaulieu. A resident of White Earth, and a descendent of an Ojibwe woman and a French fur trader, Beaulieu caused more difficulty for the Catholic missionaries than the Protestant ministers or teachers. Some of the difficulty was caused by the conflicting personalities of Fr. Aloysius and Beaulieu. Most of the tension was likely caused by the fact that the Catholic school and the government school were really the only two institutions competing for government education contracts. As the Episcopal school received support almost automatically because of its “official” status, there was little competition given on their behalf for the lucrative government contracts.<sup>39</sup>

This special status of the Protestant schools and the government support for secular schools resulted, as could be expected, in attention that was unequal. Abbot Alexis wrote to many politicians and officials for assistance in the quest to find

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<sup>38</sup> *Official Report of Indian Agent T.J. Sheehan*, 1887, SJAA, Letter Box z274

Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexis Edelbrock, January 2, 1879, SJAA fl46:7

Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexis Edelbrock, November 22, 1878, SJAA fl46:7

<sup>39</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz, *History of the Indian Mission at White Earth, Minn.*, SJAA fl46:6

appropriations for the Catholic missionaries. The Abbot demanded assistance from the government for the Benedictine schools which, according to his count, had nearly as many day students as the Protestant school as well as the “infidel public school” operated on the reservation by “a certain nominal Catholic,” (Beaulieu) and his daughter Julia, whom the Abbot notes was “not much of a Catholic.” The Abbot also requested that land be granted based on the acknowledgement of good work and the number of Native Americans they ministered to, not some official policy.<sup>40</sup>

The conflict between the Benedictine’s at the Catholic school and the Beaulieu’s at the government school quickly heightened as more requests for government aid were made for the Benedictine mission. Constantly working against the Catholic requests for assistance, Clem Beaulieu began a campaign against Fr. Aloysius, making visits to Washington, DC, publishing newspaper articles, meeting with the Agent and paying visits to influential tribal leaders. In response, Fr. Aloysius published an article in protest of the appropriation for the government school and lack of aid to the Catholic school. The government school, according to Fr. Aloysius’ article, was an institution designed to develop people “who are strangers to morality and piety.” He went on to describe the Catholic school, serving more students without any assistance in a

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<sup>40</sup> Alexius Edelbrock to Stewart, December 27, 1878, SJAA, Letter Box z274  
Alexius Edelbrock to Colonel Hunter, May 12, 1879, SJAA, Letter Box z274

converted barn while Beaulieu received between \$4,000 and \$5,000 annually for only a handful of students.<sup>41</sup>

The conflict between the Benedictines and Protestants would eventually become more an issue of pride than competition for government assistance. Because of the close ties between the government and the “official” demonimation, when conflict erupted between the Episcopalians and the Benedictines, the Benedictines usually approached the agent with caution and skepticism. Fr. Aloysius might have written to Fr. Brouillet at the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions that the Episcopalians would be satisfied with the sisters teaching a school, but “the only impediment here is Clem Beaulieu,” signifying that the real perceived threat was not from the Protestants. Yet the differences between the denominations persisted and caused much frustration. Fr. Aloysius made it his goal to constantly be a “stone in [Bishop Whipple’s] way.”<sup>42</sup> There were few friends, it would seem, for Fr. Aloysius.

The Benedictine missionaries took charge of a portion of the Native American population already converted to Catholicism by missionaries Fr. Joseph Buh, Fr. Ignatius Tomazin and Fr. Francis Pierz. Exact numbers of the Catholic Native American population do not exist, and although there are several estimates given by different missionaries at different times, none of them are reliable enough to accept as fact. While

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<sup>41</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz, *Protest*, January 20, 1880, SJAA, Letter Box z274

Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, February 6, 1880, SJAA fl46:7

<sup>42</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz to Fr. Brouillet, February 9, 1880, SJAA, Letter Box z274

Aloysius Hermanutz to Fr. Stephan, January 3, 1887, SJAA, Letter Box z274



real numbers do not exist, population estimates still play an important role in the reservation rivalry. The number of Indians reported to belong to one denomination or the other, along with other statistics such as the size or location of missionary buildings, were important benchmarks to the feuding denominations. In January of 1882, Fr. Aloysius proudly boasted the completion of the new brick church and school building as well as the conversion of all but three families near the Wild Rice River. In 1883, Bishop Rupert Seidenbusch lamented the lack of a priest at the Red Lake Reservation, not because of the lapse in ministry to the Native Americans there, but because it represented the fulfillment of "Bishop Whipple's most earnest desire." Population figures, real or imagined, were very important in keeping up the appearance that one side was ahead of the other.<sup>43</sup>

The rivalry between the two denominations changed with Native American policy. The Benedictines had applied for government contracts for the education of an allotment of students under a new federal practice of contract schools. The practice of contacting with denominations and private organizations for the education of Native American children instead of the allotment of agency schools to one denomination was a new procedure, and the result of two factors. First, the churches found it increasingly difficult to adequately operate Indian Agencies. Many found the responsibility difficult, and almost all found it nearly impossible to find qualified, intelligent and "righteous"

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<sup>43</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz to Fr. Brouillet, January 8, 1882, SJAA, Letter Box z274  
Rupert Seidenbusch to Charles Ewing, June, 1883, SJAA, Letter Box z274

men to accept the remote positions and poor pay. Secondly, questions began to be raised by politicians and social reformers as to the denial of the religious freedom of the Native Americans. It is important to note that “religious freedom” did not include the option of practicing their tribal religions, but referred instead to which Christian denomination a Native American might choose to join. Because of these and other factors, most of the churches had withdrawn from the “Peace Policy” arrangements by 1882.<sup>44</sup>

The shift to contract schools greatly benefited the Catholic Church’s missions. Under President Grant’s policy of allotting the agencies to specific denominations, the granting of a reservation was based on what church was there first. Under such a policy, the Catholics should have received a total of thirty-eight out of a little over seventy agencies that existed. However, as a result of pro-Protestant bias, they initially received eight and, eventually, only seven. Under the contract system, however, the Catholics quickly became the dominant denomination. When the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions was formed in 1874, the Catholic Church had control over seven schools and received \$8,000 in government support for their operation. In 1883, eighteen Catholic boarding schools existed at a government expense of \$54,000. By the time that Commissioner Morgan was working as head of Indian Affairs, the Catholic Church received \$2,355,416 out of a yearly budget of \$3,767,951 for Indian schools.

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<sup>44</sup> Prucha, *The Great Father*, pg. 162

Beaver, *Church, State, and the American Indians*, pg. 161

Protestant societies received only \$938,977, the remainder of which was received by various government institutions.<sup>45</sup>

It would appear as if all was finally sorted out. In the fall of 1882, however, Fr. Aloysius was informed that the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions was unable to secure a contract for the education of Native American children in the Catholic school. The reason, according to the reply from the Department of the Interior, was that a certain number of contract students were allowed each state, and Minnesota had already reached its limit. Though the failure to receive the appropriations applied for, the Benedictines received a boost in their efforts when the government inspector recommended that the Catholics be given a school after his visit in November of 1882. Apparently swayed by the argument put forth by Fr. Aloysius that Catholic children were made Protestant and demoralized in the government school, the agent recommended that the schools be divided. According to the inspector's proposal, one school, for boys, should go to the Protestants and one school, for girls, should go to the Catholics. The only difficulty created by the recommendation was that for the completion of the terms, the resident Indian Agent had to approve. The Agent, of course, was tied to the Protestants.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Francis Paul Prucha, *The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1888-1912* (University of Nebraska: Lincoln, 1979). Pg. 3-4  
R. Pierce Beaver, *Church, State, and the American Indians: Two and a Half Centuries of Partnership in Missions Between Protestant Churches and Government* (Concordia: St. Louis, 1966). Pg. 168

<sup>46</sup> Department of the Interior to Fr. Brouillet, September 22, 1882, SJAA, Letter Box z274  
Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, November 30, 1882, SJAA fl46:7

The Agents at the reservation appear to have made a poor impression with the Benedictines. Abbot Alexius had a particularly hard time with Agent Luse. The Abbot felt that Luse had refused to help the Catholics obtain contracts, and therefore he found him to be narrow-minded, inexperienced and “unable to advance the Indian.” Agent Ruffee, according to the Abbot, could have done more good for the Native Americans with \$1,000 than Luse could with \$5,000. It is important to note that previously, Abbot Alexius had the same sort of problems with Ruffee as he did with Luse. The Abbot demanded to have a new Agent, asking the question, “must an agency that is two-thirds Catholic have a Protestant as agent?” Perhaps the Abbot was still upset at Luse’s refusal to share the school allotment of \$17,000 for the reservation for the year 1883. Luse also refused, according to Fr. Aloysius, to help in contacting government officials on behalf of the Catholics.<sup>47</sup>

An important issue needs to be addressed when dealing with accounts of the bickering and conflict on the reservation. The only correspondence that exists to give us a glimpse into the situation on the reservation comes from the hand of Fr. Aloysius. This, obviously, creates an unreliable, biased source around which to reconstruct the situation. However, even if the lack of cooperation on the part of the Agent, Clem Beaulieu, or the Protestants was largely imagined, the Benedictines still would have perceived the situation to be one in which they were treated differently. Such imagined

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<sup>47</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, April 2, 1883, SJAA fl46:7  
Alexius Edelbrock to Fr. Brouillet, September 27, 1883, SJAA, Letter Box z274  
Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, May 25, 1883, SJAA fl46:7

treatment would have had the same psychological effect as if they were actually being discriminated against.

It would seem, then, that in addition to the material hardships, the Benedictines experienced hardships in the form of conflict and competition among the three groups: the Catholics, the Protestants, and Clem Beaulieu. Whether real or perceived, a situation was created that was seen as less than friendly to the Benedictines in general, but especially towards their effort at getting some sort of government support. The fact that the missionaries felt this way, whether warranted or not, would be enough to add to the attractiveness of an off-reservation school. However, even with these factors in place, there is still a piece of the puzzle missing. There had to be another factor that would push the Benedictines over the edge and into off-reservation education.

### **Factor Three**

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The Benedictines had been trying hard to get funding from the federal government for a long time, but they were constantly rejected for a variety of reasons. Then, in the course of one morning, one visit served as the catalyst for the entire venture.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of November, 1883, a sister from the Good Shepherd Convent in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, arrived at White Earth. This “Reverent Mother” possessed in hand a document authorizing her to take up to twenty-five Native American girls back to Milwaukee to be educated, at the expense of the government, at \$167 per pupil per

annum. The three Catholic missionaries were immediately alarmed. Much work had been done to fight for a contract of their own and secure government funding for the operation of their school, and all attempts had failed or been stalled. Now a nun from Wisconsin, someone on their side, was poised to erase all of their labors.<sup>48</sup>

Fr. Aloysius, who was away when he heard of the sister's presence and intent, immediately contacted Abbot Alexius and begged him to intervene so that no child be sent to Milwaukee. Fr. Aloysius returned to the mission in time to make sure that the nun was denied access to any of the children, and she was forced to leave empty handed. The immediate crisis was over, but the incident served to fan the fight for a contract between the government and the Benedictine missionaries.

After the situation with the sister from Milwaukee, Saint John's began a correspondence campaign for contracts of its own as well as for Saint Benedict's. One of the most important people enlisted in the cause of the industrial school contracts was Representative Knute Nelson from Alexandria, Minnesota. Nelson aided the Benedictines by drafting legislation in their favor and lobbying for appropriations on their behalf. In the heavy round of negation after the incident in 1883, Nelson wrote many officials in order to "jagg them up a bit" in moving forward on the applications sent by Saint John's and Saint Benedict's. Through all of this, Nelson maintained a healthy sense of humor. In many of his letters informing Abbot Alexius of a new

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<sup>48</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, November 24, 1883, SJAA fl46:7  
Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, November 30, 1883, SJAA fl46:7

appropriation secured on his behalf, Nelson would often write, “this amount not bad for a Lutheran is it?”<sup>49</sup>

The first appropriations for the industrial schools were made for Saint Benedict’s Academy in 1884. In a letter dated February 25<sup>th</sup>, of that year, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs authorized Abbot Alexius thirty Ojibwe girls to be taken from the northern reservations and placed at Saint Benedict’s. The sisters there were to be responsible for feeding and clothing the girls as well as the teaching of English, cooking, sewing, and other domestic arts. The contract drawn up on March 20<sup>th</sup> specified that compensation for such work would be at \$167 per student each year. An additional contract was entered into with the sisters that gave them another twenty-five girls at \$110 per student beginning January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1885. Students at Saint John’s Industrial School were first enrolled in January of 1885. The fifty Indian boys placed there were contracted for education at Collegeville at \$100 per student per year. The total amount earned by Saint John’s for the first year, therefore, was \$5,000 while the total amount for St. Benedict’s was \$7,760.<sup>50</sup>

Future contracts saw the fluctuation not only in the number of students enrolled, but also in the amount of money paid per capita. The highest number of students

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<sup>49</sup> Knute Nelson to Alexius Edelbrock, February, 1884, SJAA fl46:53

Benno Watrin, *Memoir Essay*, 1898, SJAA fl46:6

<sup>50</sup> N. Price to Alexius Edelbrock, February 25, 1884, SJAA fl46:53

Contract: Commissioner of Indian Affairs with the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, March 20, 1884, SJAA, fl46:52

Contract: Comm. of Indian Affairs with BCIM, March 28, 1884, SJAA fl46:52

Contract: Comm. of Indian Affairs with BCIM, December 29, 1884 SJAA fl46:53

Contract: Comm. of Indian Affairs with BCIM, November 20, 1884, SJAA fl46:53

granted at one time was one hundred for each school. The amount per student went from \$167 to \$150 to \$125 to the lowest amount at \$108. The reduction in the amount paid at first seems drastic, and indeed it was, at least according to the protesting superintendents. However, compared to other Catholic boarding schools similar to those in Stearns County, the industrial schools of Saint John's and Saint Benedict's fared somewhat better. In the notification letter for the contracts of 1886, the number of pupils allotted Saint Benedict's was reduced to twenty-five girls at the level of \$167 instead of thirty at \$150. The reduction was attributed to the fact that only three hundred students were allowed in "schools in the states," but there were five hundred enrolled at the time. Though Saint Benedict's felt the effects of the reduction, the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions pointed out that the number was reduced only by sixteen and two-thirds percent. Some schools had their student populations reduced by over twenty percent.<sup>51</sup>

So the monks and nuns finally got their school contract that enabled them to open a school. But even though they had their contract, why didn't they just stay on the reservation instead of moving off the reservation? What benefits were there, one way or the other? An examination of the cost of running the schools compared with the amount allocated in the contracts will shed light on the subject. To do so, we must analyze the

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<sup>51</sup> Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions to Alexius Edelbrock, September 22, 1886, SJAA, Letter Box z274



differences between the mission and the on-campus schools. First, let us examine the status of the mission.

At the mission, a new brick church and residence were begun in 1881. Completed in 1882, the basement of the church included two spaces used for school instruction. Previous to that, the old log school had burned down at New Years Eve and the close of 1878. The missionaries had no choice but to convert their barn into a suitable place for academic classes. Though a new building was completed, there was only room for a day school and no space for boarders. In order to receive contracts for students at the specified amounts, more room would be needed for student residences. A building of the size required would certainly have been expensive. There was no space already in existence for such a school.<sup>52</sup>

The popular views on Native American education stated that industrial education was the best for “civilizing” the Native Americans and bringing them into the greater part of society, enabling them to support themselves and live a “decent” life. What industry would be able to be taught at the mission? Some simple carpentry could be taught, but there was not a large collection of tools. What tools existed were not incredibly sophisticated. Certainly tailoring could be taught, but no sewing machines meant only simple skills could be developed. Gardening and agriculture classes could certainly be given, but it would be difficult to teach blacksmithing without a forge, anvil

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<sup>52</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz to Paul Rettenmaier, January 2, 1879, SJAA f46:7  
Aloysius Hermanutz to Fr. Brouillet, January 8, 1882, SJAA, Letter Box z274

or tools. There were not the proper resources to teach the skills of the tinsmith, and shoemaking would also be difficult without the usual equipment. Butchering, cooking and housekeeping certainly would be given with the available resources. As was evident, a complete industrial education could not be possible without the proper equipment. Surely the purchase of such items would be prohibitively expensive.<sup>53</sup>

Besides an increase in equipment and facilities, the operation of an industrial school on the reservation would have required an increase in the number of personnel stationed at the mission, as well. The staff was already spread thin without the addition of dozens of boarding pupils. The three missionaries had plenty of projects to tend to themselves. Always busy with sick calls, Fr. Aloysius was expected to be doctor as well as priest. Native Americans would travel twenty to thirty miles to the mission to be examined by Fr. Aloysius, so many that he was often kept from journeying to other parts of the far-flung agency. Naturally, when there are sick calls, there are funerals. On the reservation there were an estimated three funerals per week. In May of 1889, Fr. Aloysius wrote that he had buried eighty Native Americans since the middle of February that same year. With all of this, it is a wonder that he was able to even say daily Mass. Fr. Aloysius realized this point when he wrote, "one thing is needed here – more priests, otherwise we will lose many." The sisters were also burdened with a large

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<sup>53</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz, *History of the Indian Mission at White Earth, Minn.* (1922), pg. 7, SJAA fl46:6

workload, tending not only to the schools, but also to the housekeeping needs of the church and residence, as well as the cooking and laundry needs.<sup>54</sup>

The problem was that there was no surplus of monks or nuns at St. John's or St. Benedict's. When Alexius Edelbrock was elected abbot in 1875, the number of parishes, missions, stations and other places outside of the monastery that were staffed by monks from Saint John's was thirty-two. The members of the monastic community that year numbered fifty-two. By the time of his resignation in 1889, Abbot Alexius would have entered into sixty-nine more parishes or missions. That same year, the monastic community included fifty-seven priests, thirty-seven brothers, ten clerics and thirty-two scholastics. By the time the industrial school opened at Saint John's, the total number of sites the monks were responsible for was seventy-four. In 1884, Saint John's acquired twenty-one parishes or stations in North Dakota alone. Obviously, personnel came at a premium.<sup>55</sup>

The situation at Saint Benedict's was similar. The sisters were involved in the operation of approximately twenty-nine institutions at the time that the industrial schools were opened. These institutions included many parish schools with a few sisters, to hospitals and orphanages that required more than just a handful, and the Academy at Saint Benedict's which required sisters for administration, instruction and

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<sup>54</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, December 3, 1878, SJAA fl46:7  
Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, January 21, 1880, SJAA fl46:7  
Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, September 20, 1882, SJAA fl46:7  
Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, May 25, 1889, SJAA fl46:7

<sup>55</sup> Coleman Barry, *Worship and Work*, pg. 163

general operating support in such areas as the kitchens, housekeeping, and so forth. For all of this work, there were, in 1880, fifty-seven members of the community. Vocations would eventually grow and the number of sisters would reach one hundred and sixty-four by 1889, but no sister was idle and free hands were a precious commodity.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, opening an industrial boarding school on the mission would have been a lot of work considering the lack of many prerequisites necessary for a successful operation. The buildings were not sufficient, the industrial capabilities were small, and the personnel were spread thin. Even with a large amount of money per student, the cost of upgrading the mission would have made the allotment insignificant.

The situation on campus at Saint John's and at Saint Benedict's, however, was quite different. One of the most obvious differences was in the quality, and quantity, of buildings at the Collegeville and St. Joseph campuses. Saint Benedict's had recently constructed a new convent building, complete with spaces for Saint Benedict's Academy. At Saint John's, Abbot Alexius had launched into a very zealous building and expansion program. In addition to the buildings already in existence, Edelbrock added a new blacksmith shop, saw mill, flour mill, woodworking shop, water tower, butcher shop, smoke house, laundry, chicken coops, lumber shed, train station and finished the remaining sides of the brick quadrangle including the portion that would become the new Abbey church. All of this took place in the first eight years of his term

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<sup>56</sup> Sr. Grace M. McDonald, *With Lamps Burning*, pg. 93, 147

as superior. It is understandable why he is often referred to as “Alexius the Builder.”

The quality and immensity of the buildings in such a frontier location at such a small college was truly impressive. Archbishop John Ireland, himself not always on the friendliest terms with the German Benedictines of Stearns County, exclaimed on a visit, “Abbot, your buildings! They are simply gigantic, simply gigantic!”<sup>57</sup>

Among these impressive buildings was the old Stone House. Completed in 1866, it was the first permanent building on the campus and at forty-six by fifty feet, easily the largest at the time. It was constructed with a full basement, two stories, and attic. A brick addition was finished in 1868 that ran one hundred by forty feet and included a basement, two stories, and attic, as well. These two structures, covering four levels with a total area of twenty-five thousand and two hundred square feet, would become the new home to the Native American children from the reservations. In this building the dormitory, dining room, classrooms, recreation rooms and offices were all housed with ample room, especially as compared to the available spaces on the mission.<sup>58</sup>

At Saint Benedict’s, the available buildings were also perfectly suited to the operation of a boarding school. Several wooden structures and the old log church served not only the girls in the industrial school, but also children housed in the orphanage operated concurrently by the sisters. In April of 1886, however, the dry timber structures caught a spark and were reduced to ashes. The fire was a blow to the

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<sup>57</sup> Barry, *Worship and Work*, pg. 154

<sup>58</sup> Barry, *Worship and Work*, pg. 101

school, though no one was injured. Immediately work began on the construction of a new school so that the missionary work of educating the children might not be interrupted or transferred elsewhere. Perhaps work was also immediately begun because with no extra buildings, the Native American girls and the orphans had to live within the sisters' quarters and refectory. With the help of an engineer and laborers from Saint John's Abbey, a new brick building was raised to accommodate the children and their classes. The new building measured forty-eight by sixty feet and was three stories high. According to the sisters' estimates, the building could easily house on hundred and twenty-five girls.<sup>59</sup>

Not only was there ample classroom and dormitory space, but also the other buildings were perfectly suited to an industrial education. At Saint John's, the University and Abbey already had the shops and equipment for the trades taught in the school. There were shops for blacksmiths, carpenters, tinsmiths, butchers, shoemakers, tailors and even the brush and broom makers. There were spacious gardens and a kitchen as well.<sup>60</sup>

The two campuses were also able to overcome the personnel shortage. The monks who worked in the individual shops necessary for the operation of the campus would be able to instruct their Indian children apprentices as they worked. Similarly,

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<sup>59</sup> S. Grace McDonald, *With Lamps Burning*, pg. 122  
Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, April 18, 1886, SJAA fl46:7  
*Schools for the Chippewa Indians, 1887*, pg. 19, SJAA fl46:53

<sup>60</sup> Barry, *Worship and Work*, pg. 154

instructors who taught classes for the preparatory students or even the university and seminary students could teach a class or two for the Native American children. A monk who worked in an abbey department during the day could live in the dormitory as a prefect at night. The same situation was possible at Saint Benedict's.

So it becomes obvious that where a school on the mission would have needed to incur expenses to become operable, a similar school on one of the campuses in Stearns County would have incurred no such expenses. Operating the schools on the home campuses would have saved costs elsewhere, too. Certain supplies needed on the reservation would have been difficult to acquire at the reservation, or more expensive. For instance, when the schools on the reservation were first opened, a very limited amount of school supplies were available and ordering a larger quantity included marked up prices and higher shipping costs because of the remote location. At the University or the Academy, not only would shipping costs be cheaper because of the proximity to St. Joseph, St. Cloud or the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, but also the two institutions most certainly had larger caches of supplies for their own academic or administrative use.<sup>61</sup>

Feeding the students, especially at Saint John's, would have been cheaper as well, thanks to another unique enterprise the abbey was involved in at the same time. In 1881, Abbot Alexius purchased 1,512 acres of farmland near West Union, Minnesota for

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<sup>61</sup> Aloysius Hermanutz to Alexius Edelbrock, November 15, 1878, SJAA fl46:7

the purpose of a produce farm to provide for the Abbey and University. Upon the property, he built Saint Alexius' Priory, a large brick building designed to house a small community of monks who would work the land and supply necessary foodstuffs for the larger community in Collegeville. However, because of the personnel crunch already discussed, fewer monks were placed at the Priory than were needed to farm all of the acreage. In 1882, only two hundred and fifty acres were planted and harvested. By 1884, the farm produced 2,200 bushels of wheat, 3,000 bushels of oats, 250 tons of hay and sustained 128 head of cattle. This amount of food would have provided a great deal for a resident population of less than three hundred students and a monastic community of perhaps ninety.<sup>62</sup>

In fact, the original location of the Saint John's Indian Industrial School was to be at Saint Alexius' Priory and the first contracts are made out to such effect. It would have been convenient, with so many acres not cultivated and too few workers, to send fifty Native American boys to the farm to increase the work force. In the same manner, it was most likely convenient for the monks running the various shops on campus to have a large apprentice force to work for them as well.<sup>63</sup>

The pieces now begin to fall into place. The government has granted the Benedictines federal contracts for the education and care of the Ojibwe children at the industrial boarding schools. Instead of educating them on the reservation where some

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<sup>62</sup> Barry, *Worship and Work*, pg. 152

*Cornerstone Letter, St. Alexius' Priory, West Union*, August 10, 1882, SJAA fl45

<sup>63</sup> Contract between the Commissioner of Indian Affairs and Alexius Edelbrock, December 29, 1884, SJAA fl46:53



development of the industrial and education capabilities would have been necessary, the students were placed off the reservation on the campus of Saint John's Abbey and University and Saint Benedict's Convent and Academy where industrial, academic and residential capabilities were already in place and incurred no extra cost. Often the government even paid an extra amount towards the transportation costs of the students.

It is unfortunate that more solid financial records do not exist to shed light upon the actual costs and expenditures encountered in the running of the schools. A comparison can be drawn for the sake of argument between the cost of education of Louise Hole-in-the-day and the amount of money appropriated for a female student in 1884.

Louise Hole-in-the-day was educated by the sisters at Saint Benedict's Academy before the boarding schools opened as an independent boarder outside of government contracts through special arrangements by her family. In 1876, a bill was sent by Mother Walburga to the reservation for the cost of her tuition, room and board for the year. The total amount, which included board, clothing, supplies for arts and crafts, a slate, a primer and a reader, physician bills and other items required for her classes came to just under ninety dollars. Though eight years before the contracted Indian girls arrived, it seems unlikely that the costs of educating a girl at Saint Benedict's Academy would have risen \$77.02 in that amount of time. If the cost of educating Louise Hole-in-the-day

can be taken as typical, it is possible that the Benedictines received more money in contracts than they needed to spend to provide for the Native American children.<sup>64</sup>

Until proper records can be located or likely costs calculated by deeper research, it cannot be claimed for certain. However, the prospect of profit would have made the off-reservation venture extremely desirable, especially with the financial situation in which the monastic communities found themselves. Saint Benedict's had just finished a large brick building to house the monastery and Academy. Saint John's had just spent a significant amount of money building on campus and off, constructing hospitals, churches and parish buildings on the many newly acquired stations and missions. Assumption Parish in Minneapolis, one of the very first assignments given to the monks when they arrived in Minnesota, had incurred over \$180,000 in debt from the construction of a new church structure. Any way that the communities could save or make money to help them out of their indebtedness would have been very welcomed.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

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In the end, the industrial schools of Saint John's Abbey and Saint Benedict's Monastery were formed because of three reasons. First, the Benedictine communities were in sync with the contemporary belief in Native American assimilation. "Kill the Indian, save the man" was the common feeling toward "civilizing" and Christianizing the tribes. Second, the missionaries experienced material hardship on the reservation.

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<sup>64</sup> Mother Walburga to Fr. Ignatius Tomazin, September 30, 1876, SJAA fl46:52

<sup>65</sup> Barry, *Worship and Work*, pg. 133

Additionally, the conflict between the Benedictines, the government agent, the Protestants, and the government school officials, whether real or perceived, created a desire to go elsewhere where such external forces didn't exist or weren't as strong. Third, the financial situation of the Abbey and Monastery was poor. The possibility of financial gain through the enterprise of an Indian Industrial School would have afforded an opportunity the communities would not have passed up.

Eventually, federal policy towards Native Americans would shift again. The removal of the contract system caused dozens of boarding schools to close because of the lack of funding. The boarding schools of Stearns County closed in 1896 when the monastic communities could not afford the financial losses incurred by supporting the schools without the aid of government funding. The shift in policy and the dominance of the Catholic missions over the Protestant missions would eventually result in the Episcopalian missions becoming somewhat obscure, lacking the power and prestige they once enjoyed. The discontinuation of the Episcopalian appointed Indian Agent helped relieve some of the perceived wrongdoings and created a situation that was more even-handed.

Despite these changes affecting the off-reservation schools, the motivation to do what was thought to be "good" for the Native Americans remained. The industrial school system, and the involvement of the Benedictines of central Minnesota in its promulgation, certainly illustrates the imperfect understanding of culture and race in

the nineteenth century. A commitment remained, however, to serving the reservation population. "The assistance that American Benedictines gave to...American Indians, like that of the American Catholic Church in general, was not always given for the purest of motives, nor was it always consistent with the real needs of the people. Yet, it did touch these minorities in important ways at a time when few other representatives of the Catholic Church were willing to show interest." As the climate in the governmental agencies changed and cultural understanding and appreciation developed, so did the beliefs and practices of the later generations of Benedictines who worked among the tribes of northern Minnesota. The boarding schools and day schools at the missions remained open, continuing to serve the communities on the reservations for decades after the closing of the off-reservation schools, and continuing the work begun by Fr. Aloysius, Sr. Philomena, and Sr. Lioba.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Joel Ripinger, OSB, *The Benedictine Order in the United States*, pg. 146

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